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ABSTRACT

Readarama, a weekly reading group, was conducted in a retirement center in Athens, Georgia. Participants in the voluntary group were retired women who were lifelong readers and who continued to enjoy reading as a hobby. Because of differences in reading interests and in time available for reading, members read independently during the week; Readarama time was used for discussions of individual reading and for the exchange of ideas and reminiscences. Each week the group leader supplied supplemental, optional reading material, choosing stories from "70 Most Unforgettable Characters from 'Reader's Digest'" because of their popularity with group members. Readarama points up the value of the reading group as a social outlet, an outlet for an already-established hobby, and a way for previously active adults to maintain some level of activity and structure in their retired lives. (GW)

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ENHANCING THE LIVES OF AGED IN A RETIREMENT CENTER THROUGH A PROGRAM OF READING

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A survey of the literature in the major journals in reading, library science, and gerontology shows no precedent for reading groups conducted in retirement centers. Senior Citizens, Inc. in Nashville, Tennessee is one of the largest retirement centers in the U.S. but has no reading programs per se as part of its program. (1976) Several public libraries in major urban areas have special reading facilities for the elderly with well-lighted rooms on ground floor level outfitted with comfortable chairs, books in large print, talking books and magnification devices. Still, none of these facilities offer a reading club, or a scheduled session for interaction among elderly readers. (National Survey, 1971)

The American Library Association and its affiliated publications state that librarians need more training in dealing with the aged. Better physical facilities are needed, and more books on how to grow old gracefully. (Barnett, 1961)(Casey, 1971) These publications assume that elderly people need special services and have special interests different from younger adults, though they admit that no research is available to substantiate this opinion.

Many of the facilities and programs that are available for the elderly are in urban areas and are available only for those who are able to get to

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CS 003 365

the library; few bookmobile services are provided. The White House Conference on Aging (1971) recognized the need for more social services for the aged, including library services. As a result, a National Survey of library Services of the Aging was undertaken in 1971. Questionnaires were mailed to 1100 libraries in the U.S. to examine services available. Results showed less than 1% of federal funds available for libraries goes toward meeting the needs of the aged. The Survey called for more money, more staff training, and more concentration on the aged. Yet, a Phase II study in 1972 showed that still less than 2% of the aged received library services. Recommendations of Phase I were re-emphasized, but even now in 1977, little seems to have been done toward providing library services or reading programs for the aged.

To meet the needs indicated by the above studies, Readarama was developed for a retirement center in Athens, Georgia. The center itself is a publically funded retirement center, open to area residents over 55. The retirement center in this study offers a variety of classes and services, including furniture refinishing, picture framing, chair caning, art, creative writing and tutoring for illiterate elderly. Most participants are healthy and active adults. The Readarama participants were all involved in at least one other class at the center and various other activities in the community. Readarama ran twelve weeks - two in November, and from January 8 to March 15. It was originally scheduled to run just six weeks, but was extended because of the interest of the participants.

This paper will explain the experiment set up with Readarama, including characteristics of the members, their reading interests and habits. The administrative problems of this type group and the actual group organization

will be discussed. In conclusion the interests of the readers and the topics discussed in Readarama show participants to be a very active group of lifelong readers who happen to be of retirement age rather than a distinct group to be labelled "the elderly."

Since Readarama was to be a voluntary program, the leader was relatively sure the population would consist of avid readers. The group, which included six regular participants and six others, bore out the finding of high educational levels for people interested in reading. Two other characteristics were also observed in all members: (1) they had been active, working women; (2) they were all living in Athens to be near their children. The age range of the participants was 59 to 75.

One member had worked as a bookkeeper for over 50 years. Now, she has retired to a job as volunteer secretary for the retirement center. The oldest participant spends half of each year travelling with her daughter. A third participant still works managing a cemetary in a nearby town. She serves as a tape pal to 31 blind people across the nation. Another participant was a 73 year old college graduate who had grown up on the Oklahoma prairie and attended a sod school house, learning to read from the Bible. So all the women were active, vital women who had always lived scheduled and purposeful lives and continued to do so in retirement.

No men participated in the group because Readarama conflicted with the very popular furniture refinishing class. One man did attend when Harry Truman was discussed because he had met Truman, but he was the instructor of the furniture refinishing class and could not attend regularly. Most of the men at the center said they didn't want to be in Readarama with "a bunch of women." Interestingly, one of the female

members participated in both classes by bringing her chair to Readarama meetings and sanding as she talked.

The reading interests and habits of the members varied greatly. One member read Readers' Digest Magazine the Readers' Digest Condensed Novels. Another read Time and the newspaper. One woman, who was an insomniac, took a book and flashlight to bed with her every night. She read and dozed all night. Her interests were in contemporary fiction at present. But, she was an avid, lifelong reader, as were all of the participants.

Another member who had recently lost two daughters in a car wreck was reading a number of religious books, admittedly trying to understand their deaths. The college graduate considered Readarama as a class, the only participant who did so. She took notes both on the talk during the hour sessions and on her selections outside the meetings. A writer herself, she has published several stories in local magazines, and contributed a great deal of technical information to the group. Reading from old high school literature books her daughter had given her, she reported on the style and writing techniques of the authors.

Still another member's reading interests were dictated by an unusual reading habit. She read Guideposts, a small religious pamphlet weekly because it is lightweight and she can lay in bed, flat on her back, and hold it up to read until she falls asleep. As she commented, "When I fall asleep and drop it, it won't hurt me." This brief overview shows how diverse the reading interests and habits of the members were.

Several administrative problems deserve mention. First, Tuesday morning meetings proved to be somewhat of a problem because of the conflict with the popular furniture refinishing class. However, due to previous

commitments, the leader could not meet at any other time. Yet, this retirement center has such a comprehensive schedule that any other scheduled meeting time would have presented a conflict with some activity, also.

Secondly, sessions were scheduled to begin November 3. Because of complications in the mailing of the November newsletters to center participants, the information on the sessions did not go out until November 15. Again, in January the first meeting was postponed because the January newsletter did not go out. Therefore, the retirement center director had to personally telephone interested people to publicize Readarama.

Logistics problems arose, also because the shuttle bus service provided to participants was often late in running. The staff of the center were very cordial and extremely helpful to the leader. While the meeting room was rather noisy, as would be expected in a public center, that fact seemed to bother the 27 year old leader more than the 70 year old participants.

Since no literature was available on how to set up this type of group, the organization was very flexible in the beginning. Because no precedent was available, the leader decided to provide a story for everyone to read at the first session to generate discussion. Since the group was originally scheduled to begin on Election Day, the leader chose a 1948 Newsweek article on the Truman-Dewey election for the first reading material. Attending members chose to follow along as the group leader read the article aloud, rather than volunteering to read aloud themselves or to read silently. It was immediately apparent by their restlessness and boredom that this "read aloud" method would not be acceptable on a weekly basis. They began the subsequent discussion by saying they did not remember Truman, but by the end of the first session, members decided they not only remembered Truman

but wanted to discuss him further the following week. It is to be noted that many stimulating discussions in the twelve weeks were prefaced by, "I don't remember."

Before the next meeting everyone had individually read something about Truman or the Carter election, which became part of the conversation, also. For example, one member brought a "Personal Glimpses" column from Readers' Digest on Truman. Another had read Plain Speaking. The leader copied part of Give 'em Hell, Harry by E.L. Dayton (1956) for each participant to take home to read. Members exchanged information on materials and good books and decided to talk about Truman and Carter again the following week. That, the last meeting in November, was attended only by one person due to a sleet storm the night before. Because of holiday obligations, the group did not meet in December.

When the meetings resumed in January, Readarama members agreed that everyone would read something during the week independently and the Readarama time would be used to discuss the individual reading and exchange book ideas. By this point in time, both the members and the leader recognized the vast differences in reading interests and the time variances in how much members could read during the week. Conducting the class by group decision was very important to the members. They were alert to avoiding a class where the leader taught, bossed, or forced people to read aloud or made assignments.

At the first January meeting, the leader supplied a story which members took home to read if they wanted to. It was "My Nanking Neighbor" by Pearl Buck, taken from 70 Most Unforgettable Characters from Readers' Digest.(1967) The participants liked the story so much that they requested others from that book. The leader supplied a randomly selected story from the Readers'

Digest book as supplemental, optional reading material weekly.

The preferences for the Readers' Digest stories, all biographies, show a certain pattern that should be noted. The two most popular stories used were "Angel from Maine" by Robert P. Tristram Coffin about a woman raising her family in the frontier islands of Maine, and "Country Doctor" by Helen Graham Rezatto about a midwestern doctor. Both were set in the early 1900's and were reminiscent of the participants' early childhood days. In contrast, the least favorite story was "Unforgettable Benchley" by Marc Connelly about the work and life of Robert Benchley. It was a factual account of Benchley's life. Other similarly factual stories were the least preferred, also. All participants indicated that they had read every story weekly no matter what it was and when they missed a session, asked for copies of the stories they had missed. The Readers' Digest stories were passed on to other non-group members, also. Most enjoyed the stories because they were short and entertaining, but one member said she enjoyed them because they were lightweight and she could read them while lying flat on her back, thus supplementing her diet of Guideposts and fitting into her unusual reading habits.

The Readarama sessions generated discussion not only of reading and books but also of life reminiscences and social problems. Readarama participants were much too busy to read for long periods of time except as a means to overcome insomnia. All attendants read the newspaper daily and seemed to dismiss that as not really reading. Magazines were not read, however, because they were considered to be too expensive. Book choices mentioned by members show a preference for short stories or condensations. The participants did not buy books because of the expense. Instead, they

were given books and swapped them with neighbors, friends, and their children. Only one used the public library; others said it was inaccessible.

In group sessions, each member reported on her reading in turn. None indicated overwhelming interest in reading what anyone else had read; primarily each member read in her own interest area. Each person reported her reading, the group generated discussion on the topic and went on to the next topic. At first the leader tried to read and join in the discussion, but it was apparent that the members did not consider the leader a participant.

The talk stimulated during the discussions was as interesting as the reports on reading. The recurrent topics were the current state of the world, including Carter's presidency, the energy crisis, and violence. While Carter and the energy crisis were expected discussion topics, violence with children was a surprisingly recurrent theme, even before NBC's special program on violence in late January. All the women were concerned with child abuse, as well as the violence that children see on television. The present day life concerns discussed during Readarama were those of any active adult women - home, grocery prices, community activities, and family obligations.

Many more of the group discussions consisted of reminiscences of the past. Two members shared origins in Illinois and often discussed events and places there. Another often reminisced about building her first home from the ground up. The members' reminiscences were primarily of young married life, when their children were young.

Regrettably, Readarama had to be discontinued March 15 because of the leader's previous commitments. In looking back over Readarama, several points come to mind. First, the ladies in the group did not have time to read a great deal. They read like the rest of the active adults are perceived to read, a bit here and a bit there. The group was a means of getting together with other readers, not a class or therapy session. It was a social outlet and a way for previously active adults to maintain some level of activity and structure in their retired lives. The reminiscences were the most enjoyable part of the group for all participants. The ladies enjoyed sharing memories of their early married lives, and enjoyed explaining things to the young leader who was treated as a granddaughter. More than once appreciation was expressed for the leader's interest in them and in what they had to say.

The actual interests of the participants were varied to such a great extent that any regimentation of the group would have been impossible. It is noted that any reading group for healthy, active aged adults would have to be run either as a class (which this group did not want) or would have to be very open and unstructured, as the group was. No requirements were put on group members in Readarama whatsoever. The few times the leader tried to create structure, participants balked and stated emphatically that they weren't in school anymore.

Community problems raised during group interactions showed the group to be "engaged" and very interested in society and current events. They felt that the elderly could give valuable insight to the younger generation on some of today's social problems. However, they felt that young people were not willing to listen to them or their advice.

It is hard to say who benefitted the most from Readarama. The participants enjoyed the social aspects and the reminiscences about the past. But the leader learned of life on the Oklahoma prairie, how to shuttle coal into a stoker, how to sand a chair, and received lavish weekly reinforcement for being willing to listen and appreciate the interests of a small, active group of senior citizens who are very much alive.

SUMMARY

Readarama was established for a community retirement center in Athens, Georgia. The sessions, held one hour weekly for twelve weeks, were attended by healthy and active elderly women whose ages ranged from 59 to 75. The participants were lifelong readers who enjoyed reading as a hobby and Readarama as a social outlet. The participants were representative of the entire adult population, not a subgroup to be labelled "the elderly." Readarama points out the value of the reading group as an outlet for an already-established hobby and as a means of forming social contacts for the retiree.

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